IDRC-TS4e

Approaches and Priorities in Rural Research in India

V. S. Vyas

Postal Address: Box 8500, Ottawa, Canada K1G 3H9
Head Office: 60 Queen Street, Ottawa

Vyas, V. S.
IDRC IDRC-TS4e
Approaches and priorities in rural research in India. Ottawa, IDRC, 1977. 11p.

/ IDRC pub CRDI /. Monograph on factors to consider in conducting / social survey / s in / rural area / s in / India / — discusses the suitability of the survey technique, / data collecting /, importance of the / questionnaire / format, limitations of the / interview / method, applicability of the / village / studies; includes directives for recording / social research / results.

UDC: 30 8(540) ISBN: 0-88936-113-4

Microfiche Edition $1

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This material was originally distributed in mimeograph form by the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, India, as Technical Report No. 65. The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the International Development Research Centre.

Contents

Foreword

Increasingly, governments in developing countries are turning their attention to the problems of development in rural areas. The knowledge base about these areas, however, is minimal.

Without useful data, plans and programs for improving the well-being of rural peoples will either remain at the level of polemics or untested assumptions and preconceptions will provide the basis for action. Inevitably, the costs of such an approach will be high.

The kind of data that social scientists can gather can be useful to governments to establish priorities and for program planning and administration.

India has a long history of inquiry and investigation in its rural areas. Dr Vyas, author of the two papers published in this booklet, has been associated with a good deal of this research. His reputation and experience as a researcher and scholar are well known. The two papers published here were first published by the Indian Institute of Management, as part of a slightly larger collection of four papers. Dr Vyas has drawn from his experience to provide a set of guidelines and a methodology that will be of great value to young social scientists involved in rural investigation. Although the principles Dr Vyas expounds are grounded in Indian experience, they have a much broader application, and could serve the needs of social scientists in all developing countries.

Readers will find three major characteristics running through Dr Vyas' paper: a sense of innovation, knowledge based on practical experience of rural life, and genuine concern for the well-being of rural people. This approach is very much in keeping with the mandate and the operations of the International Development Research Centre.

I commend Dr Vyas' papers to the attention of all young social scientists in developing countries. They will find his comments particularly useful as they strengthen their efforts to think and act in terms of development priorities and research possibilities in their own countries.

R. K. Zagorin
Director
Social Sciences and Human Resources
International Development Research Centre

Some Groundrules for Rural Field Investigations[1]

In India, rural surveys are aimed at people who have very little experience in communicating the type of information being sought through a structured set of questions. To add to the difficulties, the interviewer is frequently a city-born or city-bred investigator whose mannerism, accent, and general appearance are different from the people being interviewed. The respondents' reactions to the questioning depend mainly on the conscious efforts on the part of the interviewer to minimize the element of "strangeness." This necessitates a thorough familiarity with (and respect for) the local traditions and customs. Another implication of this importance of local traditions and customs is that the scope for generalizations in the matters of organization and conduct of rural surveys is severely restricted. The situations that the researchers face are varied, and ingenuity to appreciate and adapt a given situation largely determines success or failure of the survey. This is not to suggest that no worthwhile generalizations are possible, but we should be cautious about searching for a set of universally applicable rules.

My experience is limited to the organization of comprehensive village surveys, and a few problem-oriented rural surveys in western parts of India. For nearly a decade I directed such surveys under the auspices of the Agro-Economic Research Centre (AERC) of the Sardar Patel University.[2] The AERCs have a permanent investigatory and supervisory staff. The rural surveys with which I was connected, and from which I have drawn most of the material for this presentation, were organized in a three-tier system: a project leader, one or more supervisory staff, and a group of field-level investigators. For certain types of research a project leader has to involve himself with the collection of primary data (e.g., in an anthropological survey on Ph.D. research work), or personally supervise the data collection (e.g., in the case of small-scale surveys). Some of the suggestions I have made below have to be suitably adapted, keeping in mind the organization and staffing pattern of a particular research activity.

Suitability of the Survey Technique

The first question that a researcher should ask himself is whether the survey technique is the right one to solve the problem he is studying. Often a large-scale survey is launched without asking this fundamental question. There is always a temptation to draft a series of questions and administer them to a captive audience of rural people.

The suitability of the survey technique will largely depend on the nature of the enquiry and also on the present and longer-lasting socioeconomic elements. To illustrate the second aspect, when the cost of production prominently figures in fixing the support or the procurement prices, obtaining cost data by large-scale interviewing will only serve a limited purpose. The nature of information may often be such that a large number of interviews will

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[1]Presented at the Seminar on Field Data Collection organized by the Agricultural Development Council (ADC).

[2]Agro-Economic Research Centres, numbering nearly 10, are sponsored by the Directorate of Economics & Statistics of the Ministry of Agriculture, Government of India, and located in different universities and institutions of higher learning. Most of the researches conducted in these centres are based on the primary data.

not be of much use. For example, in a recent study of income, savings, and investment conducted by the AERC in India, the quality of data collected was considered unsatisfactory. It reflected gross exaggeration of expenditure, and severe underreporting of incomes — an outcome that could have been easily anticipated. Such enquiries should probably be organized in a different manner.

In India, mainly two types of rural surveys can be identified. In the first category are the comprehensive village surveys, which enquire into the key elements of the socioeconomic system of the concerned village by interviewing all the resident households. The second group of studies is the problem-oriented type, where appropriately selected households are interviewed to obtain information on some key questions such as credit, marketing, production practices, etc. The comprehensive village surveys are useful in testing hypotheses that can be scrutinized later on with the help of other suitable research techniques. To study some of the problems involving complex interactions among various groups in a village, there is no substitute for a well-organized comprehensive village survey. The second type of rural survey, organized around a specific problem, is useful if the phenomena to be studied involve measurable variables that can be aggregated, like production, employment, consumption, etc.

Periodicity in Data Collection

Apart from the difficulties imposed by the social and political factors, the procedure of collecting information by questioning respondents is subject to limitations associated with the "recall errors." These errors can be very serious when the time gap between the enquiry and the reference period is very wide, and also when the activities to be recalled do not register as *significant* on the respondents' mind. For example, to recall the daily consumption of food, or the use of family-owned inputs, or casual work on one's own farm, etc., is a tedious exercise, and is made more so if one is trying to recall the distant past. In many situations, there is no substitute for the "cost-accounting method" of placing an investigator on the site to record the events as they take place. However, this can become a costly operation. A solution I have tried in several cases is the collection of information in a few well-timed rounds. The rounds system is a good compromise between "one-shot" data collection and the cost-accounting method. However, care has to be taken in devising the number and the timing of the rounds. One should also know the crucial phases in an activity and adjust the timing of the rounds accordingly. For example, in a dairy production survey, we first observed season-induced variations in milk production with the help of secondary data and through discussions with knowledgeable persons. The rounds were timed to coincide with the peak and trough seasons. In the Vallabh Vidyanagar AERC, some cost-of-production studies were organized to allow the investigators to be in the field during crucial periods of crop raising. So, a properly devised rounds system will provide accurate information with considerable economy of resources.

Data Collection Instruments

It should be remembered that in rural surveys the questionnaire is one of several instruments for data collection. The nature of questions in a questionnaire or a schedule will depend on the scope of the enquiry, as well as on the competence of the interviewers. In problem-oriented studies, the most specific questions will produce the most useful information. In comprehensive village surveys, the opinion questions and the open-ended questions are useful. But, in both cases the interviewers should be told in advance of the type of responses they can expect. As a general rule, a structured questionnaire is not an appropriate tool for eliciting qualitative information. Projective questions in a structured questionnaire have serious limitations unless they are administered carefully. The most likely danger in respect of these questions is that the respondents may not take them seriously. In any case, such hypothetical questions have a meaning when there is at least some possibility of

the projected events materializing. Thus, in an area where a land redistribution program is likely to be implemented, there is value in asking the landless what they would do if land is given to them. There would be no point in posing the same question in an area where no such development is envisaged.

In questionnaires, particularly those that seek general quantitative information, there is always scope for testing the consistency of answers by suitably arranging the questions. The input data can be related to the output data, income data with consumption data, etc. These related questions can be so arranged to show at a glance marked inconsistencies in a completed questionnaire.

The nature of an enquiry will, of course, determine the nature of the questions, and two crucial factors must be kept in mind when structuring the questions: the respondents and the investigators. The questionnaire should reflect the level of comprehension of the respondents, their understanding of certain phenomena, the usages to which they are accustomed, etc. The project leader should formulate the questions while keeping an "average" respondent in mind. The second important consideration is the competence of the interviewers. I have normally not entrusted opinion-eliciting questions or open-ended questions to new investigators, but rather to the more senior and experienced supervisors. In the large-scale surveys I tried to avoid, as far as possible, open-ended questions in the general questionnaire, and instead put them in shorter questionnaires that the supervisors were asked to administer. In preparing the questionnaires the project leader should always keep supervisors and investigators fully informed of the details of the enquiry. There are distinct advantages if the first draft of the questionnaire is prepared by the supervisory staff.

The questions should be easily understood by the respondents. To avoid different and sometimes conflicting interpretations by investigators, a standardized questionnaire should be prepared at one central place. For every large-scale survey, the questionnaire should be tested at two stages. First, the questionnaire should be tried on the investigators, with some of them acting as respondents. The supervisory staff and the project leader should carefully observe the way the questions are asked, and the responses they elicit. Secondly, the questionnaire should be tested in field conditions, preferably in areas where the respondent's cooperation is assured. The reasons for any change in the framing or ordering of the questions should be explained to the investigating staff.

In every rural survey, the most valuable documents are the observation notes of the field workers. More relevant insight can be gained by these notes than by the raw data. The field staff should be encouraged to write "diaries" that could later be made available to the project leader. The daily diaries should contain information on decision-making or unusual incidents or problems, and not just a record of the day's work.

Another device we have used to train the investigators and to provide supplementary quantitative information is to have the field personnel prepare qualitative notes on the major blocks of questions incorporated in the general questionnaire: for example, demographic and social features; farm business; employment; participation in production work by males and females. Through his daily contacts with the villagers, an alert investigator can provide useful information on all these topics that may not be possible even with the most elaborate type of questionnaire.

Recruitment and Training of Investigators

The AERCs have specialized in comprehensive village studies and problem-oriented rural surveys, and have recruited and trained a large number of graduate or postgraduate students as investigators. Most students come from the immediate area. The training is informal, although, for example, the Vallabh Vidyanagar AERC once organized a short-term orientation course in survey methodology. Details of the project are explained to new investigators, stressing the concepts used in the questionnaire. A brief introduction is provided to the interviewing technique, particularly if the investigator is new. Most survey organizations in India train their investigators this way.

To obtain information from the villagers, we have found that knowing the local conditions is much more useful than a strong academic background, or even formal training. With careful and constant supervision, it is possible to obtain very good results from high school or nongraduate students. Supervision requires both academic training and the capacity to appreciate "local" conditions. Successful supervisors not only have to be fully trained and otherwise qualified, but they also should be able to establish a good rapport with the investigators. Frequent visits to the villages, and more important, frequent overnight stays in the villages, serve several useful purposes. Such visits and stays make the field staff more alert, and the villagers give them better cooperation, since the visits by senior staff indicate to them the importance of the project. Also, the supervisor gains invaluable insights into the rural life, which cannot be substituted for raw data. The overnight stay establishes a close relationship between the supervisor and the investigating staff, and enables the supervisors to have leisurely chats with the villagers in the evening hours.

Although there is no substitute for formal training and field exposure, much can be gained by involving investigators at the start of the project. I have already pointed out the value of consulting investigators when the questionnaire is being prepared, and in the testing stage to ensure clarity and consistency. In the AERCs where we have permanent investigators, arrangements were made to train them in data tabulation. Most of the investigators, after the completion of field work, were asked to tabulate the data from their project. Their assistance in the computational work not only assured their fuller involvement, but it also helped in understanding some unusual statistical findings, since the investigators could provide plausible explanations not apparent from the raw data.

Researchers who wish to carry out rural surveys must give careful attention to the following: identifying the scope of the enquiry; deciding on the place of survey techniques; deciding on the timing and frequency of data collection; devising and testing schedules or questionnaires; recognizing strong and weak points of the respondents as well as interviewers; training and recruitment of the interviewers; involving the interviewers in the total task of the field data collection and tabulation; utilizing supplementary sources of information for understanding the phenomena; and maybe most important of all, establishing a good rapport with the respondents and the investigators.

Methodology of Village Studies[3]

With the exception of some important anthropological studies, village studies have not received acceptance as solid research. This is partly attributable to the peculiarly snobbish stand of some social scientists who dub any type of research based on primary data collection as "soft research." But there are some valid reasons for the prevailing scepticism among the researchers when it comes to village surveys. The authenticity of many of these studies is affected by faulty research design reflected in the inappropriate choice of the village, indifferent use of the tools of data collection, lack of attention to structuring and sequencing questions, investigational and recall errors, lack of consistency in the findings, and improper handling and presentation of the data. Some of these errors are due to the general weakness of the researchers in the art of data collection and interpretation, and are not uncommon in other types of research where primary data are processed to gain insights into problem areas. But others are peculiar to the village studies.

[3]Submitted for discussion at the Conference on Village Studies, convened jointly by the Institute of Development Studies, Brighton, U.K., and the Agro-Economic Research Centre, Delhi School of Economics, Delhi, India.

Definition

A village study, as commonly understood, possesses the following basic characteristics: (*a*) it is a comprehensive survey of the socioeconomic characteristics of a selected village; (*b*) it is based on the total census of households rather than on a sample of households; (*c*) most of the data are based on unstructured questions and observation notes of the researchers; (*d*) though the study may have a given focus, it may not be designed to test a given set of hypotheses. It is clear that in this type of research the investigator plays the key role. His training, perception, and competence to establish rapport with the respondents are the main determinants of the success of the enterprise.

Limitations

Many social scientists maintain that the village studies thus defined have only limited utility in understanding the process of change, or the ramifications of a particular measure, because the various relationships that condition the economic and social behaviour of the villages "spill" over the village boundaries. They also maintain that without understanding the network in which a village community operates, and that a part of that community is only one of the several nodes, one cannot claim to have obtained a comprehensive view.[4] As well, this same group points out that the source of power or the crucial decision-makers are often away from the village. The village is therefore at the periphery, far away from the centre of decision-making. These objections require further comment.

There is no denying the fact that a village community, even in a traditional society, is not a self-contained unit. Therefore, without understanding the links that bind it to the outside world, we cannot gain relevant insights. Similarly, in most situations, the main actors who bring about change, or resist it, are seldom the village-based local groups. However, it is precisely to understand the outward reaches of different relationships, or locate the exact sources of power, that a beginning with the village becomes very helpful.

Uses

The real question then, and to which not much attention has been given, pertains to the objectives of village studies. One can envisage at least three major objectives that the intensive studies of villages can serve, and then a methodology can be devised.

Firstly, village studies can, due to the holistic approach implied in this type of research, sharply reflect the ramifications of a force of change on various sections of population in a given socioeconomic milieu. This is especially true when the understanding of the change presupposes an appreciation of the importance of relationships in a given community. A large-scale sample survey is more likely to gloss over these aspects. This is particularly true where a measure is aimed at a structural change in the society (e.g., reforms in tenancy system). Village studies can, in such cases, simulate a complex universe.

Secondly, village studies can be used to observe more intensively as well as comprehensively certain specific problems. For example, a village study with a focus on adoption of high-yielding varieties of seeds will be able to provide all the correlates — social and economic — of the adoption process, and also suggest which of these are more crucial. Results of such surveys can be confirmed or rejected by a more pointed large-scale sample survey.

Thirdly, village studies can be designed for various action programs at the village level. Although the conventional village studies do not possess this characteristic, the "constructive workers" of the Gandhian school have extensively tried this methodology in their rural reconstruction programs. Many more researchers are accepting the view that a number of

[4]See Papers and Proceedings of the Conference of the Agro-Economic Research Centres, held at the Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, Poona (mimeo).

specific developmental activities can be organized at the village level with local initiative, and that an intimate knowledge of the village situation can be a useful aid for planning such activities. For all three types of village studies the methodology of village surveys will have to be suitably adapted.

Comprehensive Studies on the Process of Change

A research project designed to study the impact of change on a village community has to be located in an area where discernible changes caused by an identifiable force can be recorded. Thus, the selection of a village in this type of study is most important. Another important consideration is the timing of the study, if the focus is on studying the change. Here again, special attention will have to be given to the nature of change, and when the ramifications are likely to be felt.

This type of comprehensive village study comes closest to anthropological research, and would be best undertaken by a trained investigator, mainly relying on unstructured questions, recording and sifting evidence, and trying to view the village not only as a microcosm of a bigger universe, but also tracing the social and economic links that bind the village with the outside world. Establishing this network of socioeconomic relationships is as important as the examination of the intragroup variance in response to a change. The village studies of this category need not be based on a set of hypotheses. In fact, the objective may be to establish the hypotheses. The focus of the study should be clear to enable the researcher to understand the ramifications of a change. It is necessary in these situations to be clear about the nature of the change agent. For example, a study of the working of land reforms at the village level not only needs comprehensive socioeconomic data on different sections of the village community, but would also require an understanding of the legal and structural aspects of the land reform measure on the part of the researcher. Only after acquainting himself with these aspects can the researcher attempt to understand the process of change initiated by the given land reform measure.

Thus, methodological implications of this type of study are: (*a*) a purposive selection of the village to study the impact of the given force of change; (*b*) an understanding of the characteristics and attributes of the change agent; (*c*) a comprehensive survey of socioeconomic aspects of the village population with an eye on the "spill-over" of such relationships outside the village; and (*d*) an attempt at studying the process of change in the given context. It should be admitted that, on all these counts, most of the village studies will be found wanting.

Problem-Oriented Studies

For problem-oriented studies, the basic consideration should be to design the study so that it helps select crucial variables from a maze of facts and relationships. Subsequently, a more pointed and representative study can be designed. The comprehensive character of the village study should help achieve this objective. For such studies, although it may not be necessary to cover the total population, once a group is selected it becomes necessary to cover all the important socioeconomic variables relating to the concerned groups. To revert to our earlier example of the adoption of a high-yielding variety of seed program, a comprehensive village study should be designed to look into the total farm economy of the village, the economy of the groups dependent on the farmers, the prerequisites for successful adoption, constraints faced by different groups, and the possibility of removing these constraints with the actions inside and outside the village. Although the basic format of studies in this category would be similar to that of the first category, the data processing would be done from a more specific angle.

Action-Oriented Studies

The third and the last type of studies, action research at the village level, would have to concentrate on three important aspects: first, the assessment of needs and sources; second, the possibility of collective action; and third, an examination of the existing system of incentives and deterrents feasible in a given community.

The methodology of this type of study can be distinguished from the other two types in several important ways. This type of study is essentially an exercise in development planning, involving the setting up of concrete objectives, an assessment of resources, the assigning of priorities among different projects, the evolving of an organizational framework for implementing the plan, etc. Although there can be still some doubts on how much "planning" one can do in small communities where the interests of the groups do not always agree, the methodology of village studies will assist in defining the boundaries of collective action, and the possibilities of achieving some goals.

Summary

The village studies suggested here can be used as important research tools for several specific purposes. The objectives of the study must be very clear and well defined. Suitable methodologies can then be devised to use such studies to obtain relevant insights into the process of change, to serve as a testing ground for large-scale surveys, or to provide a data base for the development program at the village level.